



Relax On New Zealand's Great Barrier Island – But Leave The Hair Dryer At Home

by Keri Jones 20 Nov 2016

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You know you're on a remote island when the only pub has a sign that reads, 'Due to the lack of a bank, change is in short supply. Please use change wherever possible.' I knew that New Zealand's Great Barrier Island was going to be very different.



I picked up my boarding card for the flight at Auckland Airport. It was laminated and I had to hand it back as soon as I boarded the tiny, 8-seater Islander aircraft. It was very intimate – you could have tapped the pilot on the shoulder.

But what followed was a forty-minute journey of incredible scenery, as we flew low over Auckland, its harbour bridge and the greeny-turquoise water of the Hauraki Gulf. 62-miles later we began our descent, banking steeply across a glowing white beach. For a moment I thought the sand would be our runway, until we veered to the left and landed at the islands' tiny airport.

I've never picked up a hire car so quickly. I suppose they don't need much paperwork on a remote island of just 940 people. The car was a boneshaker but an Audi would be pretty pointless when you are lucky to get out of third gear. There's just a single-track road network on the 110 square miles of Great Barrier Island. And not all of it is surfaced. In many places your wheels are spinning on mud and gravel. Part of the road is blasted through rock – the sharp turns require full lock on your steering wheel and a toot of the horn to warn oncoming cars. But you won't resent having to drive so slowly. It allows you to take in the amazing views.





In the middle of the island there are thick forests and overgrowth, what locals call 'the bush,' but the grassy hills soften as they roll and fold down to the sandy beaches, like sheets of light-green velvet.

It took me 45 minutes to cover the 26km to Port Fitzroy, a collection of wooden villas in the woods overlooking a natural harbour and wharf and that's where I met Kay Stowell, who chose the island as her home after periods living in Auckland and London. Kay says life on Great Barrier Island is very different. "I love the quiet," she told me. "I love going home and there's no cars, no voices and no music. You hear the birds."

Kay set up the Visitor Information Centre fifteen years ago and operates it voluntarily. She says thousands of visitors arrive during the Antipodean summer months, from December to March, and most of those are 'boaties.' "There can be upwards of 900 boats in the harbour," she says, "But even at the height of the season, it'll still be quiet."

Kay Stowell



Many visitors come for the walking and they want information on the tracks. "There are easy walks for people who aren't too fit, walks that will give you views, or take you to water holes. Just go as far as you can manage then come back," she smiled.

Susie Stokes leads parties of mainland school children on walks to experience the views and wildlife. She told me the tracks can be pretty steep and mountainous, but are still good to walk on. And of course, the scenery is impressive. "You can see from coast to coast at some spots," she told me. "There's lots of bird life too, including black petrels, which look like huge blackbirds that fish out at sea."

And there are the local pateke ducks, which are endangered. Only a few thousand pairs are left in the wild, the majority of them living on Great Barrier Island. "They're like a normal duck but smaller and darker," says Susie adding, with a touch of sadness, "They're really friendly, which is why they get eaten so much. They're quite chilled out." As you drive, you'll see road signs warning you to watch out for the rare ducks.



Another unusual resident is the chevron skink – one of New Zealand's most endangered lizards. It's survived on the island, mainly because it's remained free of many mainland predator mammals.



After all that walking, what better way to relax than in a natural hot spring? Kay told me the Kaitoke springs are the place to go, especially in the off-season when it's colder and you need to warm up, so I went to check them out. The footpath takes you through a lush, green tunnel – an overhead canopy of ferns, silver barked trees and palms. You walk for about thirty minutes along a well-maintained track – it's the first time I've seen a path advertised as suitable for strollers or pushchairs! Part of the walk is on raised decking, crossing the wetlands where, if you're lucky, you can catch the cry of the rare fern bird.

Soon I reach the hot springs – a small river running into a tree-shaded pool. You can change into your swimming clothes in a convenient nearby portaloo and you clamber down a bank of hot, squidgy mud and twigs. The water is bath temperature with some hotter spots.



I was soon chatting to the other bathers who had gathered there. Kimberly Pipe moved to the islands to start a kinesiology healing clinic. I explained to her that this was the first time I'd interviewed anyone while sitting in a hot spring! "Do you come here often?" I asked, slightly embarrassed.



Kimberly told me she comes at least once a week, mainly for the free beauty treatment. "I use the wonderful mud here to make my skin look younger," she told me, smearing the dark mud all over her face. "People pay hundreds for these mud packs," she said, "but I've got it right on my doorstep." Apparently, you have to use the different types of mud found in the pool at different stages of the treatment. "Your skin will feel like a baby's bottom," Kimberley assured me.

Kimberley was cooling off, or heating up, in the water after walking up the nearby, 2,000ft high Mount Hobson. And I think she needed the rest. "We did it in an hour-and-a-half instead of the usual three hours," she said. "It's an amazing view from the top."

Great Barrier is beautiful and totally unspoiled. After a morning in the rain forest, I was off to the beach. "The beaches are very isolated and even in the summertime they're never crowded," said John Ogden. He moved here from Lancashire, via Auckland, several years ago.



Medlands Beach is stunning. You get to it walking along a short boardwalk, cut through the dunes. There are no shops, no bars and very few people. I only saw two other visitors – both of whom gave me a warm ‘hello.’ Everybody greets you here. You’ll have to wave at all oncoming drivers too. As you walk to the beach, all you can hear is the creaking slats of the boardwalk and wildlife – bees buzzing and flies humming – until you reach the wide expanse of sand and the ocean fills your senses.

Medlands is a crescent of deep, fine, white sand framed by the rich, green bush and mountains. There’s a high, grass-topped outcrop halfway along the beach, known as ‘Memory Rock.’ Stairs are carved into its face, so you can climb to the top and you can also see grooved markings at its base, left by years of weapon sharpening by the local Maori who used to inhabit the island.





You make your own entertainment on Barrier, although Chaos Fishing Charters' Barry Kearney can help. 'Baz' was preparing fish – snapper and hapuka – in a smokehouse in his front garden when I met him. There's lot of wildlife in the waters of the Hauraki Gulf that surround the island. Baz says pods of up to forty dolphins will often come right up to the beach, barely 70 metres from his front gate.

Baz Kearney



His boat tours can also show you some of island's historical sites, such as the old whaling station and what was once one of the biggest kauri wood plants in New Zealand. These trees are pretty rare now but were prized by the British Navy because the tall, straight trunks were perfect for making ships' masts. Baz can also take you to see what remains of the copper and goldmines. "They made money," he told me, "but in the end they just ran out."

The tiny Milk, Honey and Grain Museum is fascinating. The entry sign tells visitors the admittance fee is 'a gold coin' – via an honesty box. And once inside, you'll find three interconnected wooden sheds filled with old household and farm implements, some still working, which tell the story of the island's pioneer families.



You might be surprised at the range of industries that have employed islanders over the years, from whaling to gum digging. They collected it from the kauri trees in the 1880s and sold it to produce varnish, glue, resin and linoleum. You can learn about the shipwrecks too and see a bedframe that washed ashore. Apparently a live snake turned up once – they think it came off a boat from Panama.



The remoteness of the island has helped shape its history. In the main hamlet of Claris they still have a shop called the 'Pigeon Post.' Birds really were used to send messages, attached to their feet, to Auckland in the Victorian period. The island's main roads have only recently been tarmacked and some communities, like the hamlet of Whangaparapara, are still only

reachable by gravel roads. Islanders often travelled around by sea before the road. "People living at one end of the island never knew people at the other end," Baz told me, "because it was a two hour drive."

And there's another thing that visitors need to prepare for – you won't be able to use hairdryers or irons on Great Barrier Island. That's because there's no mains electricity. In the 1970s, Barrier had a large alternative lifestyle community. Some people told me it was a hippy enclave and that spirit is still alive.

"The people who come to live here are looking for something different," said Kay Stowell. "They're very independent and strong willed. This lifestyle suits them and people accept one another, even with all the eccentricities that in the city would get on people's nerves. Here they're tolerated because everyone's like that."

Today there's still an active arts sector on the island. Artist Sue Roberts volunteers at the Great Barrier Island Heritage & Arts Village, which occupies a former schoolhouse in Claris. It was established in 2005 and the wooden building was moved to its current site then.



Sue Roberts



Sue says there's a huge range of artwork on display, from paintings and metalwork to sculpture, textiles and ceramics. In fact, she says it was only when the Art Centre opened that locals realised just how much creative talent existed within the island population of 940 people. And the centre has encouraged even more artists to reveal their hidden abilities. "The Barrier lifestyle lends itself to artistic people. If you don't think you have a talent, often just being here, whatever is hidden in you, will come forward," says Sue.



Heading along the road to the main wharf, I passed a house with an art gallery 'open' sign. It looked like there was nobody at home until suddenly the artist appeared out of the depths of the garden. Sarah Harrison is owner of Shoal Bay Pottery. She studied art in Auckland before returning home and has now been here for 22 years.





Sarah Harrison



Sarah's work captures the natural forms of the island, like the shells washed up on the beach or the native birds. Her studio has a lean-to filled with old televisions, furniture, crockery and toys – which at first glance could be a work of modern sculpture in itself. It's actually a community up-cycling project. You can leave or remove items without charge and is designed to reduce reliance on landfill.

The island's green and sustainability movement is well established. Locals have to produce their own energy, clean water and deal with any waste. Solar panels provide the electricity. At my accommodation, Bob and Tipi's Waterfront Lodge, they turn off the wall sockets at certain times of the day and overnight. If you visit, you'll need to plan ahead for charging your electronic devices.



Bob and Tipi's Waterfront Lodge



Maire Burns from the island pub, The Currach, in the waterside community of Tryphene, says you need to be self-sufficient. "We're completely off-the-grid," said Maire, who originally hails from the west of Ireland. "We run off solar panels during the day then turn on the generator in the evening to make sure the beer is cold." You won't find a plug-in toaster and you can't use hair tongs, irons or hairdryers in most places. "You can dry your hair in the evening when the generator's on," Maire told me, "but not in the morning, when we're running off solar power."



Maire Burns and Phil Judd



The building was originally a youth hostel, but Maire said when she and her husband took over, they quickly realised, "the income wasn't going to feed the children."

“Luckily I had the right accent so we decided to open an Irish pub.” It’s friendly, has a very traditional feel with regular music and events. When I visited they had a party, watching the Eurovision Song Contest on satellite TV! The bar food is superb – go for the seafood chowder with homemade rye bread. “We grow all our own herbs and we’re lucky to get lots of fresh seafood here,” said Maire, as she gave me a tour of her impressive pub garden.

Things grow well in this climate. I went to watch olives being harvested on the steep hillside at Earthsong Lodge. Owner Trevor Rendell was a chief purser for Air New Zealand and now runs the small and exclusive, luxury three-suite lodge, where well-heeled guests fly in by helicopter from Auckland.



Olive picking at Earthsong Lodge



Earthsong Lodge

There's a Saturday morning local food and produce market nearby. At the end of a short line of fruit and veg stalls I found Janene Hunsdale. By day, she works remotely as an IT expert. At the weekend she sells her Janene's Ice Dreams lollies and ice creams. You'll be introduced to some exciting local fruit flavours that you might not have tried before. When I visited, she gave me a taste of tamarillo ice cream, a tropical fruit similar to a tomato, as well as the local fruit feijoa.



Janene Hunsdale

Great Barrier Island will give you a very different view of New Zealand. The scenery is amazing, the peace and quiet is refreshing and it's the perfect place to come for a few days if you want to get away from it all. It's not a high-end luxury island (apart from Earthsong Lodge) – the accommodation is basic but comfortable. It's the perfect place to bring kids if you want a safe 'Swallows and Amazons' style activity holiday, based around hiking, beaches or the water.